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SUBJECT: THAKSIN RUNS INTO POLITICAL TURBULENCE

REF: BANGKOK 3852

**¶1.** (SBU) Just over four months since his massive election victory, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is looking much less like the invincible politician who easily swept back into power. The opposition is tenaciously pursuing corruption questions regarding purchase of security equipment for the massive new airport being constructed on Bangkok's fringes and that story is in the Thai and English headlines every day. Transport Minister and Thai Rak Thai (TRT) financier Suriya Jungrungreangkit is headed for a bruising Parliamentary debate over his management (although not his personal involvement in corruption) which will reflect badly on Thaksin. To make matters worse, long disgruntled TRT faction leader Sanoh Thienthong is openly threatening to leave the party, and angling for an expulsion (versus voluntary withdrawal), which would protect his member of Parliament (MP) status. It is a long way from that point still, but if Sanoh can take enough people into the opposition camp, then the Administration's debunkers would have enough votes under the 1997 Constitution to force Thaksin's ministers to face embarrassing impeachment hearings. End Summary.

TRANSPORT MINISTER DUE FOR A GRILLING

**¶2.** (U) Thaksin's administration continues to catch the glare of public scrutiny over allegations of corrupt practices. Opposition Democrat Party (DP) and Chart Thai Party (CT) leaders Abhisit Vejjajiva and Barnharn Silpa-archa have agreed to file a no-confidence motion against the Transport Minister Suriya Chungrungruangkit over the CTX scandal in the new international airport project. They delivered the motion to the House Speaker on June 15. The debate date has not been decided, but will likely be in the last week of June.

SANOH POLITICAL THORN IN THAKSIN'S SIDE; WANG NAM YEN FACTION IS RESTIVE

**¶3.** (U) TRT faction leader Sanoh Thienthong is continuing his very public feuding with Thaksin Shinawatra, going out of his way to provoke him. In a recent interview he derided Thaksin's "fancy populist policies" as simply political promises that will increase the personal debts of farmers and villagers. In addition to slamming the Prime Minister's core policies, Sanoh is making the extravagant claim that the 1997 Constitution "has enabled one single person to take over the whole country." (Note: Sanoh has long bridled under the rule that a candidate must be a member of a political party for a minimum 90 days to be eligible to run for the Parliament. An MP who voluntarily leaves a party loses his seat in Parliament. However, if an MP is expelled from his party and the Constitutional Court rules that the party was "undemocratic" in taking that step, the MP retains their seat. This accounts in part for Sanoh's strategy of baiting Thaksin and for also associating himself with such popular causes among Senators as an end to the one consecutive term limit for Senators. End Note.) Thaksin, for his part, is trying to appear above the fray, telling reporters that governing the country is a higher priority than treating with Sanoh.

TRT ROILED BY SANOH'S ACTIONS

**¶4.** (U) But Sanoh's antics are having their impact. A TRT MP and Wang Nam Yen faction member from Ubon Ratchathani, Sombat Ratno, vowed publicly last weekend to follow Sanoh to another party if the latter is ejected from the TRT. Sombat claimed that more than 40 other faction members would follow suit. The faction will discuss its position this week. Meanwhile, another Wang Nam Yen member from Ubon Ratchathani, Kriang Kalatinan, has reportedly denied rumors that Sanoh would resign from the TRT, pointing out that what Sanoh had actually said to the public was he wouldn't care if the TRT expelled him because of his acrimonious speech in the last House meeting (Ref. A). Observers here speculate that Sanoh could precipitate his expulsion by ordering his faction members to vote against Transport Minister Suriya

Chungrungruankit in the censure debate.

CABINET SHUFFLE SOON?

15. (U) Government Whip Committee Spokesperson Watthana Sengphairo said on June 13 that if Sanoh Thienthong and his Wang Nam Yen faction members vote in the coming censure motion against Transport Minister Suriya Chungrungruangkit in defiance of the party's line, they will certainly face TRT disciplinary punishment. The Deputy Interior Minister, who is also Chairman of the TRT MPs, Somchai Sunthonwat has stated that a cabinet reshuffle is likely soon, but denied it is because of the pressure by the opposition, or the Wang Nam

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Yen, or any corruption problem in the government. Somchai optimistically predicted that Sanoh and his faction will not vote against the TRT in the upcoming National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC) constitutional amendment proceedings (Ref A.).

WHY THE TRT DOES NOT WANT TO FORCE SANOH OUT

16. (SBU) A source in the TRT leadership told the Embassy on June 10 that the party does not want to expel Sanoh and his faction members out of fear that if they keep their MP status they would join the opposition. Currently the opposition Democrat Party (DP) and Chart Thai (CT) hold 121 seats, just short of the requisite 125 votes to formally request the Senate to remove a cabinet member (section 304 of the Constitution). The DP and CT command 121 votes. A move by Sanoh and even a portion of his faction to the opposition (if the opposition would accept the volatile Sanoh) would give it the votes to bring potentially damaging impeachment proceedings against Thaksin's ministers. According to the TRT source, the plan now is to let Sanoh stew impotently within the party, despite his attacks on Thaksin.

17. (SBU) Comment: Thaksin is looking his most bedeviled at least since his assets concealment case in the opening weeks of his administration. Apart from the ongoing airport purchase scandal and Sanoh Thienthong's open rebellion, Thailand has had a long drought, oil prices are up and economic growth forecasts are being scaled back. The recovery from the tsunami and news of an almost daily toll of separatist violence in the Thai southern border provinces have hit tourism numbers. The press seems emboldened by Thaksin's troubles. From his recent image as a political Midas set to shape Thailand's future for some years to come, Thaksin for now is finding himself in the unfamiliar situation of being on the defensive. End Comment.

BOYCE